Chaucer and Morris

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Chaucer and Morris may be called the two great narrative poets of English literature. Since Chaucer the English-speaking world has had some great poets, but none whose work has combined such power of narration with other distinctively poetic qualities so markedly as has that of William Morris. Separated as they are by five centuries of civilization, these two great Londoners are alike in many ways; their work shows resemblances which serve to establish a bond of literary kinship between them.

Certain well-authenticated facts in the life of Morris show that he had a loving and intimate knowledge of Chaucer. He became acquainted with Chaucer's works

Mackail in 1855. The Life and Death of Jason

p 61.

appeared in 1867 and the Earthly Paradise in 1868. Shortly after the publication of the first part of the latter, a German student at Marburg wrote to Morris, asking if it were true that Chaucer was his model. To this Morris replied:

Mackail, p. 197.

"I quite agree as to the resemblance of my work to Chaucer: it only comes of our both using the narrative method; and even then my turn is decidedly more to Romance than was Chaucer's. I admit that I have been a great admirer of Chaucer and that his work has had, especially in my early years, much influence on me, but I think not much on my style. In fact, I by nature turn to Romance rather than Classicalism."

Morris's published utterances

as regards his relation to Chaucer are of value. The first occurs in the seventeenth book of The Life and Death of Jason. The lines follow:

"Vouchsafe that I
Had but some portion of that mastery
That, from the rose-hung lanes of
woody Kent
Through these five hundred years
each songe have sent
To us, who, meshed within this
smoky net
Of unrejoicing labor, love them yet.
And thou, O Master! — Yea, my Master
still,

O Master, pardon me, if yet in vain
Thou art my Master, and I fail to
bring
Before men's eyes the image of the
thing
My heart is filled with: thou whose dreamy
eyes

Behold the flush to Troilus cheeks arise
When Troilus rode up the praising street
As clearly as they saw thy townsmen meet
Those who in vineyards of Picton with stood
The glittering horror of the steel-topped wood."

Another is the Envoy to the Earthly Paradise, too long to quote, but which expresses Morris's love for Chaucer, whom he again calls his master. A third tribute to the love which Morris bore to Chaucer is the Kelmscott edition of Chaucer's works, which was the affectionate labor of the later years of Morris's life.

These facts are evidences serving to substantiate the belief, gained from a study of their poetry, that Chaucer really had some influence on the work of Morris.

The Canterbury Tales and the Earthly Paradise are the principal bases of investigation in this paper.

Between these two there are certain resemblances which occur at once to the reader.

The general method is the same: the narration by different persons of various tales, linked together by a common motive. Chaucer sends forth a band of English pilgrims, and makes them beguile the tediousness of the journey with the recital of stories. Morris conceives of a company of fourteenth-century Norse mariners, grown old in a vain search for the Earthly Paradise, who near the ending of their lives, find rest in a hospitable city, and there at feasts provided by the elders, recite various legends, or listen to such recitals by the poets. Each poem has a prologue, giving the situation and circumstances under which the tales were told. The various tales which compose the

separate parts are linked together in Chaucer mainly by the comments of the auditors and an introduction of the next speaker; in Morris also by the comments and conversations of the listeners and an explanation as to the time and circumstances of each meeting. There is another feature which adds to the individuality and charm of the Earthly Paradise, the introductory verses to the different months, which precede each group of two tales. These short poems are veritable jewels, richly adorning the fabric of the work.

The purpose of the two poets was probably the same in the main; to entertain the readers and make them forget themselves in the contemplation of the histories of others.

Among the most clearly marked resemblances in Morris's work to that

of Chaucer is the verse structure. Chaucer, it will be remembered, used in all his poems the eight- or nine-syllabled, four stress line, or the ten- or eleven-syllabled, five-stress line, with the exception of Anelida and Arcite, and the parody of the romance-metre in Sir Thopas. Monk's verse is clearly modeled on that of Chaucer. The Life and Death of Jason is written in heroic couplets. In the Earthly Paradise the styles of verse used are exclusively Chaucerian. Of the twenty four tales, seven, The Man Born to be King, The Writing on the Image, The Hatching of the Falcon, The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon, The Story of Acontius and Cydippe, The Fostering of Cullang, and the Ring Given to Venus, are written in octosyllabics, four-stress lines. The other seventeen

are in ten syllabled, five-stress lines. The Introduction is in octosyllabic lines, the Prologue, Epilogue and Envoy in decasyllabic. The songs for the months are sometimes in octosyllabic lines, sometimes in decasyllabic.

The verse is remarkable for its ease and fluency and often for its musical quality. I can not forbear quoting some lines which I think show well with what grace Morris used the Chaucerian metres, and with what additional charm and beauty his own genius invested them. The following are the opening lines of Atalanta's Race:

"Through thick Arcadian woods a hunter went,
Following the beasts up, on a fresh spring day.
But since his horn-tipped bow

but seldom lent
Now at the noon-tide nought had
happed to slay,
Within a vale he called his hounds
away,
Harkening the echoes of his lone
voice cling
About the cliffs and through the
beech-trees ring."

Another quotation, from The Man Born to be King shows something of the musical quality of Morris's verse, and the fitting of sound to sense.

"Remembered not on this sweet morn
When to the ringing of the horn,
Jingle of bits and mingled shout,
Toward that same stream he rideth
out
To see his grey-winged falcons fly.

So long he rode he drew anigh
A mill upon the river's brim,
That seemed a goodly place to him.

For o'er the oily smooth mill head
There hung the apples growing red,
And many an ancient apple-tree
Within the orchard could he see,
While the smooth millwalls white
and black
Shook to the great wheel's measured
clack
And grumble of the gear within;
While o'er the roof that dulled that
din
The doves sat crooning half the day
And round the half-cut stack of hay
The sparrows fluttered twittering.

Morris's rime-scheme also is Chaucerian, as well as his stanza structure. The Canterbury Tales, with the single exception of the Monk's Tale, are written either in rising couplets, and without stanzaic divisions of regular length, or in the seven-line stanza, rising

a b a b b c c. Morris has paid equal attention to the two styles, using the seven-line Chaucerian stanza in the Introduction, the Envoy and ten of the tales. The Prologue, the Epilogue and the other tales are without stanzas of regular length, and are written in rising couplets. The introductory verses to the months present no variation, some being written in couplets, and others in the seven-line stanza.

Morris is fond of alliteration, and uses it with as good effect as did his "Master." His rimes seem easy and natural. There are few if any forced rimes, and no free use of poetic license. Sometimes, but not often, we find eye-rimes. Morris is often helped out in a troublesome rime by the use of a word from middle English.

which he mingles with present-day diction in a very delightful way. His language shows plainly the influence of his Chaucerian studies, many favorite words and expressions of Chaucer having become apparently favorites of Morris also. This trick of Morris in introducing middle English words imparts a quaint flavor to his poetry, helping to give the impression of a time come centuries back.

In one respect Morris's diction differs from Chaucer's. While Chaucer clings to the language of common life, Morris's words seem more poetical, less commonplace. When he uses commonplace phrases, he manages to use them in an unusual way. However, he is not stilted or formal, but nevertheless gives a

tinge of ideality to all that he touches.

Morris could not be called a realist at all comparable to Chaucer. The conception of the very situation which serves as an excuse for the telling of the stories is more fanciful than that of the Canterbury Tales. A pilgrimage such as Chaucer describes was not at all uncommon in his time; he had doubtless taken part in such a one himself. But the situation of a band of young men setting out in good faith for an earthly Paradise and pursuing their wanderings through many years and over varying lands and seas, is decidedly more unlikely than such a journey as the Canterbury pilgrims took. To be sure, one must take into consideration the sophistries which

five centuries of progress have added to humanity. It is conceivable that such a thing may have happened, in the light of what we know regarding the absurdities and follies of the popular belief at the time. Those who could believe in a philosopher's stone, alchemy, astrology and kindred "sciences" might have undertaken such a voyage. But after all, it only *may* have happened. And even supposing that it did, the voyagers themselves were in no certainty of finding what they sought: their belief was that of the heart, which, as Lowell says, "will believe any beautiful miracle in behalf of what it loves", or in this case, of a thing it hopes for. At any rate, the whole thing is in a shadowy region, far removed from the clear light of a May morning

shining on a simple English scene.

This unreality pervades the entire work. Indeed, what seems to me the most striking difference between Morris and Chaucer is that quality in the work of the former for which I can find no better term than dreaminess. The march of events goes on like happenings in a dream. The descriptions, beautiful and vivid, are not in themselves lacking in any quality which could contribute to what we call a good description, but the pictures seem somehow surrounded by a dim, elusive atmosphere like the blue haze that colors an autumnal landscape. As we read we see things clearly enough, but when we have closed the book and are trying to recall scenes or incidents, they appear but dim

and shadowy. It is as though we have awakened from a sort of opium dream, in which we get the delightful visions, without any unpleasant effects. Now and then it is true, a scene or a picture flashes out like a cut diamond from the misty, sapphire-colored setting of the rest. But in general Morris's world is not our world. It is an enchanted garden, where the wand of the magician has caused to blossom flowers so delicate and fragile that they perish almost in our grasp. Of the legends in the Earthly Paradise, The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon is surely the most dreamy. What could be more charmingly indefinite and suggestive than its very title! And this atmosphere of dreamland prevails throughout the poem. Indeed the substance of it is

made up of dreams within dreams.

Chaucer, in his most lofty moments, never loses sight of the good solid earth. A word or a line brings him back to it. He is wholesome, cheerful, in every way human. His characters have human hearts; their souls are stirred by human passions and emotions; they are generally of a sort which we can easily comprehend. Some of them, it is true, hardly seem made of common clay - the Lady Costance and Griselda for example. But they are clearly drawn and individualistic. Marie is not equal to Chaucer in this respect. All his women - to whom he pays any particular attention - are alike beautiful, pure, statuesque, reminding me of the white lilies which bloom, one on each successive day, each just as lovely as the last.

and having no individual characteristics to make it remembered above its predecessor. So Morris's women blossom in the gardens of his Earthly Paradise one by one, being admired and then forgotten in the perfect beauty of the next. Morris's men are gray-eyed, handsome, strong and brave, but they too are copies of one another. In the Prologue for instance there is nowhere shown that mastery of character sketching which has made the prologue to the Canterbury Tales such a delightful and unique bit of poetry. Morris's characters are in fact less human than Chaucer's. Take Atalanta for example. What human heart can there be in a girl who sets such terms and calmly sees

the destruction of so many men whose only fault 'presumably was that they loved her.' She seems to be made of ice. The Lovers of Gudrun impresses me as being the most far-fetched and impossible of the poems. The uselessness of the cruelties and follies of the several characters is astonishing. They are like creatures working under the ban of some evil spell. The Man Born to be King, The Writing on the Image, The Son of Croesus and The Prood King contain characters who seem real and human. Alcestis is much like the Custance of Chaucer. To call her as human as Custance is not saying much, for Custance is probably the most exalted and saint-like of Chaucer's women. Alcestis endures no trials such

as full to the lot of Constance, hence has no opportunities to display the virtues of sanctity, patience and humility in suffering. Her trial is sudden and soon over; it is the deliberate relinquishing of her life for another's. She makes the sacrifice, and here in one touch she shows herself as human as Constance. The thought of hate comes into her heart for an instant, which is paralleled in Constance's momentary feeling against her husband whom she believes to have cruelly wronged her.

Morris when he chooses is capable of depicting deep feeling and powerful passion, whether it be that of love, hate, jealousy or revenge. He makes us feel the misery in the heart of the proud

king almost as keenly as though we ourselves were suffering in a similar situation. Another of his most effective pictures is that in which he shows us the wild rage and despair of the Queen in Bellerophon at Argos, when her love turns to hate.

Morris is fond of depicting the emotion of love. In his treatment of it he is unlike Chaucer in at least one respect. The love which Morris describes is hardly, even without a note of yearning, of unsatisfied longing. It is a passion which has in it something of dissatisfaction even at the moment of most exquisite delight. The lovers look beyond the present bliss to fear a future which threatens loss and disappointment. Love seems to distrust its own

joy, to make the heart more restless and troubled. In the Doom of King Darius occur these lines:

E. P. I-p. 282

"O love, to think that love can pass away,
That soon or late to us shall come a day
When this shall be forgotten."

In Pygmalion and the Image is again the same thought:

E. P. II. p 271.

"I love thee so, I grow afraid
Of what the gods upon our heads may send.
I love thee so, I think upon the end."

The Hill of Venus is a powerful picture of the remorse and longing of the human heart.

Morris dwells more on the beauty of love than does Chaucer. True, it is more often a material beauty than a spiritual one.

He never descends to grossness; the love he depicts is a refined passion, but it is a love which delights in and depends upon physical beauty. Morris puts two beautiful young creatures together and surrounds them with music, flowers, fragrance, in short any and everything which contributes to a beautiful setting. He neglects no detail which can add to the charm of the picture. Chaucer is much less refined in his treatment of love and does not so insist on the idea of beauty. To be sure he is not averse to beauty - of character as well as person. He has given us some women in whom the two are combined; for example, Griselda, Custance and Virginia. But he does not disdain to

speak of love between persons who are not patterns of beauty. In Morris the story of Cupid and Psyche makes love most beautiful. The extreme delight in material beauty, the sensuousness of treatment here is not like Chaucer, but it is very much like Keats.

Indeed, in his worship of beauty Morris is more like Keats probably than he is like any other poet, ancient or modern. Chaucer it is true loved the beautiful, but not with the intensity of Morris. In him it has become a passion. If he is the poet of love, he is not less the poet of beauty and if Keats holds first rank, as he is generally considered to do, as the apostle of the beautiful, Morris certainly deserves the

second place. Morris in fact carried the love for the beautiful into his daily life more than Keats. He was always creating the beautiful with his hands as well as his brain. He always surrounded himself with an atmosphere of beauty; in his home beauty reigned supreme; he could not bear ugliness.

Both Chaucer and Morris loved Nature and not the least charming element in their work is the nature-description. Their poetry has that unmistakable quality which proves their observations to have been minute and loving. Their treatment of nature however is somewhat different. With Chaucer Nature is beautiful but simple. She smiles at him with the innocent eyes of a young girl, all tenderness,

simplicity and youthful merriment. To Morris Nature shows her deeper, sadder moods. She is grown older, more serious, not less beautiful but with a maturity which hints of change. She has within her calm, deep eyes the query of life's mysteries and that shadow which the inevitable and approaching death casts over his victims. Morris understands the effect which nature has on our feelings and enters into this in much of his verse. His descriptions of nature in the Earthly Paradise are perfect and always suggestive.

In his love of whatever is good and pure Morris resembles Chaucer. It is obvious enough that whatever of coarseness there is in Chaucer is to be ascribed to the times rather than to the personality of the man.

There is no coarseness in Morris, and this is due not more to the conventionality of the nineteenth century than to the tastes and ideals of the poet. A man who loved beauty as Morris did could not endure the ugliness of vice and impurity.

To be sure, he does not express his own sentiments on this subject as vigorously as does Chaucer, and in this lies one of the differences between the two. Chaucer is fond of giving his own opinion on the actions of his several characters in good set terms; of consigning the evil doers to avenging fiends and of calling down the blessing of Heaven upon the good. His conversational touches on life in general give an agreeable brightness to his style and a sense of familiarity

which one does not find in the work of Morris. Morris does not comment, he leaves characters and events to make their own impression on the reader and adds no words of his own.

Of that delightful humor which is so characteristic of Chaucer we find hardly a trace in Morris, either of that which is called humor in the popular sense, mere "funniness" or that other sort which perhaps comes nearer a true explanation of the term, that humor which hides under an appearance of lightness a serious earnest and which is closely akin to pathos. The absence of humor in Morris's poetry helps to give it a darker shade than is ever found in Chaucer's verse. Morris intends us to enjoy, but he does not purpose

to minister to anything lower in us than our sense of beauty. He would scorn to gain our attention by means of any commonplace artifice to make us smile - if indeed he were capable of doing so. I am not sure that he does not try to do so. Attempts at humor would be a blemish rather than an ornament upon the sustained dignity and beauty of his style.

Marie is inclined to dwell longer on the depiction of a single situation than is Chaucer. He has not that trick of setting a situation before the reader in a few effective lines and passing on to another with that ease of transition which is one of Chaucer's characteristics. Chaucer certainly is in no hurry; he does not spare words when he comes to tell of something which

he particularly enjoys, but he can skip here and there with an agility which seems foreign to Morris.

In plain truth Morris, if read uninterruptedly for two or three hours, becomes monotonous. His style lacks variety, because there is no variety of motive. Nor do we find as many distinct and varied attributes in the style of Morris as in that of Chaucer; everything is subdued to a dreamy, seductive beauty, with nothing to clash with the soft, sweet harmonies in which he delights.

There is a dreariness pervading most of Morris's work which is directly opposed to the buoyancy of Chaucer's spirit. This is caused by a sort of fatalism, which runs throughout his work, appearing sometimes even in his most joyous poems. There

is a feeling of fleeing always from death, which must sooner or later put an end to earthly happiness, and which casts a chilling shadow over the gayest hours. Morris loves to describe happy scenes where love and sport and the delights of sweet music and the light laughter of girls reign supreme, but very rarely can he leave such a scene without that reminder that all this must pass away. This tinge of fatalism is Paganistic. There is not the conventional Christian attitude of looking at life, even in the Christian poems. All earthly things must change and die; beauty will fade, youth flee and love pall, - and this death is looked upon as the final end. There is no sustaining hope of a better life beyond; there is at most only a suggestion of such a

possibility. This sense of dreariness is apparent even in the Prologue. We are introduced to persons whom we see to be old, careworn, bent with years and with faces furrowed by lines deeper than years can trace. Their story serves but to accentuate the impression of gloom. How different this is from the Prologue of the Canterbury Tales, with its clever bits of characterization, its flashes of fun and that atmosphere of mirth and good feeling.

The thought of death appears very often in the Earthly Paradise, even in the early volumes. These lines in the song to March* are an instance:

*C.P. I p. 103

"Ah, what begetteth all this storm of
vice
But Death himself, who crying solemnly,
Even from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness
Bids us, Rejoice, lest Pleasureless ye die."

The same idea occurs in the song for May, one of the most beautiful despite its melancholy:

"I held my breath
And shuddered at the sight of Eld and Death.
Alas! Love passed me in the twilight dim.
His music hushed the wakening ouzel's song;
But on these twain shone out the golden sun,
And in their heads the brown bird's tune was strong.
As shivering, twixt the trees they stole along;
None noted aught their voiceless passing by,
The world had quite forgotten it must die."

The resemblances to Dancers in the Mask of Morris are most clearly marked in the first volume of the Earthly Paradise. After this volume one can notice a difference of spirit. This is easily felt, less easily explained. But there is less of the freshness and spontaneity, the careless joyousness, the ease and freedom which we are

accustomed to associate with the Chaucerian manner. We can not fail to believe that this change is the appearance of the real Morris.

What then was Chaucer's influence on Morris? First, Morris had always a passionate love for everything pertaining to the age of Chaucer - as exemplified in his manner of life, his home-surroundings and the atmosphere of his writings - and a special love for Chaucer, as the most delightful representative of that age. Always fond of story-telling, after he had read Chaucer the notion very naturally came to Morris of retelling some of the old tales from various store-houses of the world's literature, with the purpose of giving some pleasure and enjoyment to his English people. That the series was directly suggested by the Canterbury Tales seems beyond question, and as Morris wrote it is it not

likely that he modeled his work not unconsciously on that of the man whom he liked to call 'his master.' But as he went on, his own strong personality could not fail to become predominant, and the work begun in Chaucer's manner ended in Morris's - which is peculiarly his own. They are alike in many ways. The flowers of autumn resemble those of the spring in certain general ways. They have borrowed something of their colors and perfumes, but they never effect us as the spring time blossoms do. The sky above them is turning gray and the wind is beginning to moan in a sad minor key. They suggest death, not life; sorrow, not joy. We are unwilling to take our straining gaze from their passing beauty, for already our anxious eyes have imagined a fading of their bright petals, and the gardens promise

us no more. Chaucer suggests the Spring, Morris the autumn, which flames for a moment ~~with~~ the blaze and glory of summer before it fades into the cold dreariness of winter.